

Assignment #3
THE CULTURAL ANALYSIS ESSAY
English 101 – Sections 121 & 135
Instructor Sung Ohm
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This essay will further develop your close reading and analytical skills by applying them to a cultural analysis of another text. Culture is defined as that body of shared beliefs, histories, and experiences of a group that includes knowledge, attitudes, arts, morals, laws, customs, and language. Furthermore, we can also understand culture as a tenuous accomplishment that various members of a society work at explaining, enforcing, exploiting, or resisting—consider some of the many articles we have read so far. A cultural analysis might best be described as the study of historical, political, social, and economic forces that structure the relations within a culture or society. This assignment will challenge you to rethink what “American culture” means. I want you to explore the relationship between our everyday assumptions (or prevailing dominant cultural beliefs and values) and how the knowledge you’ve gained in this class might challenge some of those assumptions.

Using labor analysis, class analysis, corporate analysis, or a Marxist lens as an *interpretive lens*, choose a particular text to analyze. In other words, you’ll use the critique of capitalism as a way to understand either a text or cultural ideological values. You will have two options—an analysis of the news or an analysis of a documentary movie/video. I have chosen these works particularly because they challenge popular misconceptions of class and capitalism. Furthermore, they force us to deal with the contradiction between capitalism and democracy. You will be asked to choose and analyze a primary text. However, you may use other sources (secondary texts) to support your reading of the primary text.

Choose **one** of the following options:

OPTION 1: The Mainstream News Media

A free news media is crucial for a democracy. And traditionally, the news is thought of being objective and unbiased information about significant local and global events. Many people assume that opinions and beliefs are omitted from dominant, mainstream news sources. However, if we look more closely and carefully, we can see that the mainstream news is loaded with ideological values and assumptions. In other words, they contain rhetoric—they are meant to persuade a certain group of people to think or act in a certain way (or even limiting their thoughts and actions). As our readings, videos (such as Myth of the Liberal Media), and class discussions have show, the mainstream news media is particularly biased toward people in power (what Marx and Engels might call the bourgeois).

Following the critiques we’ve seen within the Communist Manifesto, I would like you to closely analyze the discourse/language the *corporate* news media uses to influence it readers. Using the concepts from the readings and class discussions, I would like you to analyze how the mainstream news media is loaded with values and assumptions—i.e. ideologies. I would also like you to analyze the way the news is shaped and discuss how they serve to limit discussions and debates, ultimately limiting the democratic process. Consider how the corporate structure of the mainstream news serves certain ideological, political, and economic interests. You may want to re-look at the video, Myth of the Liberal Media (available at the library).

Choose a mainstream news magazine from the course website to analyze (such as Newsweek, Time, and US News and World Report). I recommend that you choose one related to the wars the US has been waging recently—such as Afghanistan or Iraq—because our readings help us understand the language contained in these types of articles. Your analysis should reveal some of the complex messages and codes that are within the text—ideologies, assumptions, cultural values, etc. For this reason, you should pick a work that has plenty of these ideas and values to work with—one that is loaded with suggestive cultural values and meanings. You should not choose an article you *really* like because I am asking you to critically examine the text. Sometimes when we choose something we like, we cannot place enough

critical distance between the work and ourselves. Remember, *this is not a review* (I do not want to know if it is necessarily a “good” or a “bad” article, per se). Analyze how the particular article works to persuade its readers toward a certain ideological objective.

You should use secondary sources from the assigned readings to help provide you with an analytical lens (such as “Eleven Ways of Looking at the Gulf War,” “Dehumanizing People and Euphemizing War,” “Collective Bias,” “Terrorism: Civilized and Barbaric”). You may also look at independent, alternative news sources to see other perspectives that the mainstream news media omits. Consider how the independent news media (i.e. non-corporate) gives a larger perspective. You may want to reflect how your own assumptions and understanding might be limited by the inherent biases of the mainstream news. Finally, you might want to negotiate how your analysis reveals the contradiction between capitalism and democracy (as we’ve discussed in class).

OPTION 2: Documentary Movie and Self-Reflective Analysis

This option will be more of a self-reflective analysis rather than a textual analysis. The movies chosen for this particular option are meant to question or even challenge dominant, mainstream assumptions (you should try to list some of these assumptions before you begin your paper). Furthermore, I have chosen these movies particularly because they disrupt popular conceptions of class and capitalism and because they force us to deal with the contradiction between capitalism and democracy.

Choose one movie from the following list:

1. Supersize Me
2. The Big One
3. Fahrenheit 9/11
4. A Day Without a Mexican (a mockumentary)
5. The Corporation
6. “Is Wal-Mart Good for America?” Frontline

Analyze the way the movie challenges dominant mainstream assumptions, values, and beliefs. The focus of this particular option will be on *your* cultural context (your shared histories and experiences as a member of a group as well as the communal experiences that define a particular culture) rather than the philosophical context of the text itself. You will look for the text's relationship to the meaning you create as a reader situated in a particular culture that has reading experiences, expectations, and a personal history as a result of a particular cultural perspective. In other words, this is a ***self-reflexive essay***—one that asks you to question how you arrived at that particular reading of the text. How did your life experiences affect your interpretation of the text? You may want to consider the social, political, economic, ideological, and historical forces at work in the interpretation of a text. What shared knowledge did you bring in to understanding the text? How might your interpretation reflect your cultural influences? Show how some specific points of your personal context—you identity, experiences, beliefs, values, and convictions—have given you a distinctive insight into the text.

Write a well-organized, well-thought-out, critical analysis essay. It should be 3-6 pages standard academic format—double-spaced, approximately one-inch margins, 12-point Times font or equivalent, and have a title (see Rules for Writers for specifics on academic format). Make sure to have 3-4 copies for the first draft peer critique workshop. See the course schedule for due dates. Refer to “Chapter 14: Cultural Analysis” in the *Student’s Guide* for a better understanding of this assignment.